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Humanitarian NGOs: Dealing with authoritarian regimes

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Humanitarian NGOs: Dealing with authoritarian regimes[1]

Oliver Walton

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges facing humanitarian NGOs that work in authoritarian settings. Drawing on examples from North Korea, Myanmar, Darfur, and Sri Lanka, the paper examines some of the central dilemmas facing humanitarian actors in these contexts and the strategies they have deployed to address these. The paper then examines the oft-repeated recommendation that humanitarian agencies need to engage in more rigorous and more strategic analysis of their work in order to improve practice. I argue that there has been a failure to adequately assess the motivations of authoritarian regimes and the complex implications their interests and strategies may have for humanitarian engagement. This discussion also highlights the neglected role of local humanitarian actors and communities in maintaining humanitarian access and protection in authoritarian contexts.

Keywords

NGOs, humanitarian, authoritarian, politics

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1 Introduction

> *"When the day comes when they can speak freely, will the farmers, workers, and prisoners of North Korea thank me or condemn me for having collaborated with the state to deliver aid?"* Reed (2004)

> *'There are very few opportunities to look back and say "We confronted, and it didn't work." We're told we have no leverage. I don't know if that's true….Overwhelmingly, we decided at all costs to stay engaged. It hasn't worked. It hasn't helped us to protect IDPs and it hasn't helped us to get influence'.* UN worker in Sri Lanka cited in Keen (2009)

While much of the recent humanitarian literature has focused on the challenges of working in weak or 'fragile' states, providing assistance in the context of authoritarian rule throws up distinct challenges for humanitarian agencies. As the quotations above illustrate, humanitarian NGOs operating in these environments are often required not only to anticipate the actions of opaque and unpredictable regimes, but also to interpret the demands of populations who may be prevented for expressing their true needs. NGOs are confronted by a range of questions in these contexts: whether they can they operate in authoritarian countries without strengthening the regime; how and under what circumstances they should 'speak out' against state violence or abuse in these contexts; what functions their presence may perform for authoritarian regimes; and how working with local groups may help to challenge or undermine these functions.

The cases examined in this paper sit on a spectrum from formally democratic governments that have seen a gradual erosion of democratic governance over time (as in the case of Sri Lanka), to totalitarian or post-totalitarian regimes such as North Korea or Myanmar. Authoritarian governments share a number of common features, which include a state controlled by a single leader (or small group of leaders), limited political pluralism, constraints on political mobilisation, the lack of an elaborate ideology, and a tendency to exercise power in ways that are formally ill-defined (Linz 1964).[2] Labelling a government 'authoritarian' is of course, a highly political exercise engaged in mainly by western analysts and governments. It is important to acknowledge that while western countries typically see authoritarian regimes as a potential barrier to effective humanitarian action, countries such as China, Russia and Iran may see a strong state as an important pre-cursor to effective civil society (see Hirono 2013). In China, for example, the state is the main humanitarian actor and is largely viewed by the general population as a positive moral agent. NGOs and civil society are closely controlled by the state and play a more limited role (Hirono 2013). It is important for humanitarian agencies to recognise that authoritarian regimes' perspectives on humanitarian agencies may be founded on fundamentally different assumptions about the respective roles of the state and civil society, and that populations living in these contexts may also have quite different views about the roles and responsibilities of humanitarian agencies working in these contexts.

The characteristics of authoritarian regimes affect the activities of humanitarian NGOs in

[2] Authoritarian regimes are often distinguished from totalitarian states which are 'controlled by a single, mass-mobilizational political party backed up by a pervasive secret police, [which] maintains monopolies on mass communications, the coercive apparatus, and other societal organizations' (Gasiorowski 1990: 111).

important ways. First and most obviously, authoritarian regimes' distaste for dissent limits space for humanitarian advocacy and has led INGOs to pursue a creative array of strategies for promoting humanitarian access and civilian protection. Second, in contrast to fragile states, authoritarian regimes are often characterized by an extensive state presence and well-developed bureaucratic systems. These systems may be difficult for INGOs to negotiate, particularly if they have limited experience in the country. These difficulties may imply a more significant role for local NGOs and community groups who have developed the requisite levels of trust to work in these contexts and have a more nuanced understanding of complex bureaucratic structures. Authoritarian governments' high capacity makes them more effective proponents of 'humanitarian access denial', considered by the UN to be one of the core challenges to civilian protection (UN Security Council 2009). Denial of humanitarian access can take a variety of forms including placing bureaucratic constraints on humanitarian agencies, allowing armed conflict to threaten the safety of civilian populations, and facilitating or directly engaging in violence against humanitarian personnel (UN Security Council 2009).

Third, since authoritarian regimes often legitimize themselves on the basis of a response to an external threat (Gasiorowski 1990), certain forms of humanitarian action are often readily instrumentalized by these regimes to shore up domestic political support or burnish their nationalist credentials (particularly in cases when INGOs have become closely associated with international efforts to promote peace and security). Fourth, while humanitarian NGOs are liable to be instrumentalized by donors in a wide range of contexts, this tendency appears to be particularly marked in authoritarian regimes where foreign governments often lack alternative channels for engagement and are more likely to use humanitarian assistance as a bargaining chip in wider political negotiations with an intransigent regime or (perhaps more commonly) as a means of demonstrating that 'something is being done' in situations where the options for real engagement are limited.

Some of the problems that confront humanitarian agencies in authoritarian contexts appear to have taken on new dynamics in recent years. As has been widely discussed in the literature, since the 1990s, humanitarian action has become increasingly bound up with ambitious international efforts to promote peace, security, human rights and transnational justice. Emerging discourses of humanitarian intervention such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) have posed an explicit threat to state sovereignty and have damaged humanitarian actors' relationships with authoritarian regimes in several high-profile cases. In Darfur, for example, the efforts of the International Criminal Court to indict President Bashir prompted the decision to expel thirteen INGOs in 2009. In Myanmar, Western invocation of the R2P doctrine in response to the regime's denial of international humanitarian access in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008 led to a hardening of the regime's position (South 2012).

Another feature of the current climate for humanitarian action, which has also received growing attention in the literature, has been the increasing prominence of emerging powers in international affairs (particularly the BRIC countries – Brazil, Russia, India and China). As recent humanitarian crises in Darfur, Myanmar and Sri Lanka have shown, western governments have declining leverage over authoritarian regimes and international institutions are usually poorly-equipped to confront authoritarian governments over breaches of international humanitarian law or human rights violations. Emerging powers have worked to counter western activism in areas of peace, security and civilian protection in the UN Security Council and the Human

Rights Council.[3]

A third feature of the emerging environment concerns the strategies deployed by authoritarian regimes. Recent crises in Darfur and Sri Lanka have shown how authoritarian governments are using sophisticated communication and administrative strategies for stifling the efforts of international humanitarian NGOs through the creation of bureaucratic barriers, failing to provide adequate protection, or directly threatening NGOs (Labonte & Edgerton 2011). The recent humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka illustrates the degree to which governments can use emerging global norms and agendas such as R2P and the Global War on Terror to their own advantage in pursuit of military goals. David Keen (2009) has suggested that governments facing international humanitarian interventions may be 'learning lessons' in the manipulation of aid and truth from crises elsewhere.

The next section will sketch out some of the central dilemmas facing humanitarian actors in authoritarian states and discuss some of the ways in which humanitarian agencies have dealt with authoritarian regimes. The third section examines the oft-repeated recommendation that humanitarian agencies need to engage in more rigorous and more strategic analysis of their work in order to improve practice (Egeland et al 2011; Collinson & Elhawary 2012). I argue that in particular there has been a failure to adequately assess the motivations of authoritarian regimes and the complex implications their interests and strategies may have for humanitarian engagement. This discussion also highlights the often neglected role of local humanitarian actors and local communities in maintaining humanitarian access and protection in authoritarian contexts.

I argue that humanitarianism should always be conceived as a political exercise, but that the need to pay attention to politics is particularly acute in authoritarian contexts. While much of the existing literature has focused on the degree to which external actors, global trends, and flaws in international humanitarian system have undermined humanitarian principles and limited humanitarian agencies' room for manoeuvre (Collinson & Ellhawary 2012), this paper calls for a greater emphasis on the role of host governments and the way in which their interests and strategies both influence and are influenced by international aid agencies' presence and actions.

2 Dilemmas and Responses

The central question for international humanitarian NGOs operating in authoritarian states has been whether it is possible to work in these contexts without in some way strengthening the regime or inadvertently assisting it in the pursuit of policies that run counter to humanitarian goals. NGOs such as MSF who have typically argued that humanitarian agencies should withdraw when they are denied the ability to monitor where humanitarian aid is being allocated, or when they are unable to speak freely about the underlying causes of health or nutritional problems (Terry 2011). In North Korea, for example, aid has been used to support the *songbun* system of 'politically aligned class status', by protecting 'core classes' living

[3] China's image as an uncritical backer of 'rogue regimes' is perhaps undeserved. Brautigam (2008) describes, for example, how China lobbied Khartoum to allow UN peacekeepers into Darfur. More recently, China has supported peace talks between Sudan and South Sudan.

outside the North East of the country against famine in the mid-1990s. During times of crisis aid was reserved mainly for politically-favoured classes, while 'hostile' classes were neglected (Eberstadt 2011). Eberstadt (2011) suggests that the only tenable approach in this context is for a more principled stance where INGOs threaten to withdraw unless the regime provides extensive health and nutrition data. Exile groups and their supporters have made similar arguments about the delivery of aid in Myanmar (Terry 2011).

On the other side of the debate are those that maintain that even in the most restrictive environments assistance can be delivered according to humanitarian principles and without providing any significant advantage to the regime. In North Korea, Smith (2002) and Reed (2004), for example, describe how several international humanitarian agencies saw significant improvements in their relations with the regime over time and felt that their presence led not only to improvements in humanitarian access and improved living standards, but to a dramatic increase in their North Korean counterparts' understanding of 'the extent of the suffering and the depth of the problems in their own country' (Reed 2004, 208).

If NGOs accept that there is space to stay and work with the regime, they may engage in a range of nuanced and contextually-tailored strategies and tactics. Reed (2004), for example, has described how NGOs that committed to the long haul in North Korea adjusted their programmes to suit the prevailing conditions in a variety of ways including by limiting their activities to areas where programmes can be regularly visited, gradually building trust with the regime by starting their programmes in areas the regime considers priority, and by selecting projects that do not require frequent contact with the general population. A number of studies highlight the role of personal connections in ensuring access in authoritarian contexts. Terry (2011, 110) describes how the success of the Dutch section of MSF in gaining access in Myanmar was often explained by the fact that 'the head of MSF-H plays golf with the generals'. Debates around whether to stay or engage are often clouded by 'half-truths' with authoritarian regimes' opponents exaggerating the benefits accrued from international aid', and agencies that choose to remain in these environments downplaying the constraints placed on them (Terry 2011).

The goals of humanitarian assistance in these settings often go beyond traditional welfare and protection goals. In totalitarian contexts such as North Korea and Myanmar, it is sometimes argued that the simple presence of international actors in the country can drive a process of gradual opening up to outside cultural, economic and political influence. In North Korea, the emergency response to the famine crisis in the 1990s had the unintended consequence of supporting the development of private markets in a command economy since large amounts of food aid were diverted for resale (Maxwell 2012). As Cha (2012) has described (writing about the consequences of a similar process of opening up prompted by a South Korean private sector initiative): '[t]he change is microscopic but it is real, so that the next time the government tries its old ways of reasserting control over the economy… there will be a different response'. The opportunities to transform social and economic relations point towards another dilemma – the degree to which INGOs should seek to promote rehabilitation and developmental activities (as opposed to focusing solely on humanitarian relief). While authors such as Reed (2004) have urged NGOs to adopt this more transformative stance, it is clearly a more contentious and risky position which demands a more long-term commitment from NGOs and their funders (Reed 2004). Adopting a more transformative position may lead NGOs into domains that authoritarian states 'are accustomed to considering as their exclusive

preserve' (Kahn & Cunningham 2013: 5). While this dilemma confronts humanitarian organisations in a wide variety of contexts this stance is particularly problematic in authoritarian contexts where the state's legitimacy is often closely tied to its capacity to protect and control its population. Authoritarian regimes are generally more likely to interpret a prolonged presence by humanitarian agencies as an 'existential threat' to their own legitimacy (Kahn & Cunningham 2013). In certain authoritarian contexts trust with the government may be largely dependent upon maintaining a more limited mandate (for example, by focusing on medical needs) (see, for example, del Valle & Healy 2013).

Another critical choice facing NGOs that decide to remain in authoritarian environments concerns their decision either to speak out publicly about abuses and protection issues, or to keep quiet and prioritise access and the delivery of services. Adopting a low profile can help to build trust, and improve humanitarian access over time, but may also involve a transfer of security risks to local staff. It may also encourage a shift towards more small-scale programming, limiting the scope for more ambitious programmes such as large-scale food delivery (HPG 2011).

INGOs often face considerable risks when speaking out in authoritarian contexts. Engaging in advocacy (or being associated with human rights activists) can have both dire consequences for individual organisations and their programmes, and wider negative outcomes for humanitarian access and the welfare of vulnerable populations. The thirteen NGOs expelled from Darfur after the International Criminal Court (ICC) ruling against President Omar Al-Bashir in 2009 were all accused of leaking information to the ICC. The expulsions led to a decline in NGO-led civilian protection activities as health services and programmes treating victims of gender-based violence were reduced (Young 2012; Labonte & Edgerton 2013).

In light of these risks, some argue that NGOs should only speak out when this course of action supports clear political or operational objectives. Lacharité (2011) justifies MSF's decision to remain silent about the severe humanitarian consequences of the war in northern Yemen between 2007 and 2009 on the grounds that speaking out would have produced little benefit: MSF was the only aid agency working in this region, and the Yemeni government was very likely to respond to public criticism not by curtailing violence but rather by revoking MSF's registration (the country received little western media coverage and was aligned with the US). This calculation was vindicated when an ill-judged MSF publication of December 2009 counted Yemen as among the 'Top 10 Humanitarian Crises'. MSF's authorisation to work in northern Yemen was immediately suspended and only reinstated after MSF sent an official letter to the Yemeni authorities acknowledging the biased nature of its report.

The costs of engaging in advocacy can appear particularly prohibitive in cases where western governments or the UN have little appetite for applying pressure. During the recent humanitarian crisis that unfolded during the final stages of the war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), aid workers were very sceptical about the ability of western donors or the UN Security Council to apply leverage, reflecting both the fact the influence of these traditional donors over the regime was waning, and the fact that powerful western countries such as the US and the UK were broadly supportive of Sri Lanka's effort to defeat the LTTE (Keen 2009; Weissman 2011). In this environment, prioritising access over advocacy failed to reap any useful benefits for humanitarian agencies – an emboldened Sri Lankan government both neglected civilian protection concerns and withdrew

humanitarian access as it advanced into Tiger territory (Keen 2009).

Keen (2009) stresses that the prevailing view amongst NGO staff that they possessed very limited leverage was in fact based on a partial misreading of the situation or at least an unwillingness to accept reality. He notes several missed opportunities for action and points of leverage. So, for example, the World Food Programme underestimated the degree to which its resources were valued by the regime. Others highlighted the continued value of links to western countries for the Sri Lankan regime in terms of schooling and health services in the West (Keen 2009). NGOs and their donors clearly face a range of powerful political, bureaucratic and individual motivations for adopting the more consensual path of prioritising access. As will be discussed below, overcoming this strong set of incentives requires contextualized and politically-engaged analysis, which may be particularly difficult to generate in a rapidly-unfolding humanitarian crisis of the kind that occurred in Sri Lanka in 2008 and 2009.

There is considerable scope for strategic complementarity in humanitarian actors' efforts to maintain access and pressure governments. Writing about the aftermath of the 2010 floods in Pakistan, Pecharye (2012) argues that the decision taken by some NGOs to work closely with the Government of Pakistan was justified despite their strategy of excluding political opponents in areas under their control on the grounds that it was important to reach the largest number of people. This position, however, was strengthened by the fact that others agencies focused on groups that were politically marginalized by the Government and deliberately avoided alignment. '[T]he coexistence of both policy positions proved positive as long as they remained clearly stated and monitored' (Pecharye 2012: 168).

In conflict-affected regions such as Sri Lanka, Sudan and Ethiopia, humanitarian agencies have been used by governments to provide cover for a range of political and military and security objectives. One of the most common strategies has been to use aid to control the movement of populations in support of broader military goals. Conversely, governments have often used humanitarian assistance as a means of demonstrating their good intentions either to war-affected populations or to the wider world (Keen 2009). Regimes may also use humanitarian access as a means of asserting control or leveraging the international community as has occurred in Sri Lanka, Sudan and Bosnia (Keen 2009). These dynamics are not peculiar to authoritarian regimes, but these governments tend to have the greatest capacity to exercise them.

Humanitarian agencies' ability to provide 'protection by presence' in conflict-affected regions can often be undermined in authoritarian contexts such as Sri Lanka, where the government was able swiftly to scale back the humanitarian presence once the war resumed (Keen 2009). In volatile conflict situations where ground conditions fluctuate rapidly, a gradual strategy of trust-building is often unfeasible. In the Sri Lankan case, the government exploited inadequacies in terms of NGOs' capacity, coordination and internal communications and successfully countered claims from the UN and others about civilian casualties or the level of humanitarian need. As a result, most humanitarian NGOs deferred hard decisions about the potential need to speak out or withdraw. Keen (2009: 51) concludes that in this case, 'exerting pressure at an early stage' may have paid dividends and that making concessions had emboldened the government.

The dilemmas discussed here have shown that engagements between authoritarian states and humanitarian agencies do not conform to a single model. The analysis so far suggests that in order to make effective decisions about whether or not to speak out against abuses, or whether their presence is indirectly supporting a regime's objectives, humanitarian agencies will need to engage in dynamic analysis of the available political opportunities and incentives that surround government decision-making.

3 Understanding authoritarian regimes

Tensions between humanitarian NGOs and authoritarian regimes have often been sparked by NGOs' failure to engage in reflective and strategic analysis. In Darfur, distrust between humanitarian agencies and the government was partly driven by international staff's lack of experience, which resulted in these agencies taking a partial approach to the conflict, accepting the accounts of the conflict provided by their beneficiaries and neglecting or discriminating against Arab communities (Young 2012). Decision-making was driven by headquarters, and many NGOs conducted only very limited reporting and assessments of the wider situation on their own. As a result, NGOs' public information closely mirrored human rights reports and the more politicized media coverage driven by international Darfur activist campaigns (Young 2012).

Determining whether to engage in advocacy is a complex calculation which involves weighing up a range of unknowable and unintended consequences. Slim (1997) has argued that there is an inherent bias towards prioritising the more short-term and readily quantifiable objective of continued access and delivery of aid above the longer-term and less clearly defined benefits associated with advocacy. The consequences of international advocacy may be even more unfathomable in authoritarian contexts than elsewhere: as Reed (2004: 207) argues 'in the case of authoritarian regimes nature seldom takes the course that outsiders expect'.

Since the motivations of authoritarian regimes are particularly difficult to understand or predict, strategic analysis in these contexts should involve a deeper consideration of the motivations and strategies pursued by authoritarian regimes themselves. This type of analysis has been usefully initiated by Labonte and Edgerton (2013), who build on OCHA's typology of humanitarian access denial (creating burdensome bureaucratic constraints, failing to honour protection responsibilities to civilians or humanitarian agencies, and direct violence against NGOs), to consider variations in the approaches of different authoritarian regimes (using case studies of Ethiopia, Sri Lanka and Sudan). They distinguish between strategies designed to protect national image; those concerned with preventing humanitarian access and civilian protection on the grounds that it poses a threat to domestic military or security goals; and finally 'proxy access denial' strategies where states 'perceive humanitarian access and civilian protection as a bargaining chip to advance other regional or international policy goals' (Labonte & Edgerton 2013). They suggest some ways in which this kind of analysis may assist NGOs' strategic planning – arguing, for example, that humanitarian agencies should carefully assess government's commitments to uphold civilian protection, and examine whether these match policy pronouncements. In contexts such as Darfur, Sri Lanka, or Ethiopia, where there is a large degree of hostility towards humanitarian agencies, INGOs may need to engage in remote programming or cross-border interventions (Labonte & Edgerton 2013).

In many of the situations described in this paper, humanitarian NGOs' decision-making would have been enhanced by considering the way in which their association with wider activism (from governments, campaign groups, or human rights NGOs) in areas such as peacebuilding or promoting human rights can provide opportunities for authoritarian governments to burnish their nationalistic credentials. In Sri Lanka, the government and various nationalist political parties used real or invented cases of NGO malpractice and misappropriation to highlight the malign influence of western culture or to play up the threat of western intervention as part of a broader effort to assert and mobilize around the government's political agenda, which sought to reduce the role of western governments and mobilize along nationalist lines (Walton & Goodhand 2009; Walton 2012). Similarly in Sudan, the Sudanese government used the expulsion of international NGOs in 2009 as a direct rebuke to western activists in the aftermath of the ICC ruling against President Al-Bashir. It also provided the government with an opportunity to demonstrate the wider limits of NGOs' efforts and assert its own capacities to support its population. As Young (2012: 106) argues, most analysis of these contexts has focused on 'manipulation of aid by the government of Sudan' and there has been a lack of 'critical self-examination within the humanitarian community of how international actions [have] directly and indirectly affected the people of Darfur, including their current vulnerability and future resilience'.

Although the inner workings of authoritarian regimes are usually deliberately opaque and their actions often appear irrational or unpredictable, conducting a closer analysis of the incentives and motivations that shape their decision-making provides a useful starting point for humanitarian action in these contexts - as Parry (2013) has stated in relation to the North Korean government: '[m]ost of the Kims' behaviour is rendered understandable, often logical and occasionally even reasonable, through the simple mental exercise of placing yourself in their shoes'. Authoritarian regimes are usually either isolated or embattled players on the international stage or have a lot to gain domestically from depicting themselves as embattled. As such, the presence and actions of international humanitarian actors can have an important influence upon both the outward and inward projection of power. Acknowledging this fact, and seeking to understand the ways in which humanitarian interventions may impact upon the processes of legitimation that surround these regimes, should form a more central part of INGOs' engagement in these environments.

As well as analysing the impact of international activism on local dynamics, there is a need to weigh long-term goals against short-term ones. In terms of generating attention and funding, international activism around the Darfur issue was successful, but the wider implications in terms of relations with the government, humanitarian access, and the welfare of the marginalized groups in Darfur were probably negative (Young 2012). Similarly, Keen (2009: 101) stresses that the immediate dilemma of maintaining access or addressing abuses must be considered alongside the broader consideration of upholding humanitarian principles: 'today's trade-off, even when it appears to be a sensible one, may create a worse situation (and a smaller humanitarian space) tomorrow — because of the signals sent'. When crafting advocacy and engagement strategies humanitarian agencies need to consider the complex internal and external political dynamics that shape government decision-making, thinking in particular about how speaking out can embolden the regime or pay various political dividends.

Engaging in better analysis of the local political economy of aid may lead to a greater appreciation of the activities of local organisations. INGOs often neglect the role of national

NGOs in providing humanitarian assistance or under-estimate their influence (Keen 2009; Young 2011). Local organisations and communities often have highly developed strategies for dealing with authoritarian regimes, which international humanitarian actors fail to acknowledge or understand. These strategies are built on a 'detailed and sophisticated understanding of the threats and challenges they face', which is difficult for international actors to replicate (South 2012: 6). Local NGOs' may have a better understanding of which departments or individuals represent the most fruitful entry points for collaboration or influence. Advocacy that fails to understand the incentives surrounding regimes can often undermine behind-the-scenes advocacy of national NGOs, which may be more measured yet more effective.

Communities themselves also deploy a range of strategies to ensure humanitarian access and protection. South and Harragin (2012), for example, describe strategies used by communities in Myanmar to ensure protection, which include having a family member join rebel groups in order to provide a degree of protection against Burma Army soldiers, feigning ignorance of the political context, or engaging with officials to persuade them to limit the extent of abuse. Although 'document and denounce' advocacy may have some influence over the regime in Myanmar, behind the scenes advocacy is probably more effective 'in achieving results which actually improve people's lives' (South & Harragin 2012, 7).

International humanitarian actors then should make greater efforts both to understand the dynamics of local protection strategies, and to acquire a better understanding of the social, economic and political impacts of their own interventions. These insights may also imply a greater focus on strengthening local capacities for self-protection and aid delivery. Supporting local actors, however, is not straightforward, as their 'priorities and activities can be distorted by engagement' with international NGOs and donors (South & Harragin 2012). Research in Sri Lanka has shown that national NGOs can very easily be tainted by association with foreign donors or INGOs, and such links are often exploited by nationalist politicians (Walton 2012).

4 Conclusions

The dilemmas confronting humanitarian NGOs in authoritarian states do not differ in any fundamental way from those that arise in other contexts. Nevertheless this paper has illustrated several unique and important features of the environment for decision-making that can constrain humanitarian NGOs' options in these contexts, and make these dilemmas particularly difficult to resolve.

NGOs operating in these environments tend to lack unrestricted access to vulnerable populations, and may therefore lack clear information about their welfare and protection needs. NGOs are also likely to lack independent analysis of the wider political and security context, and are typically constrained in their ability to conduct independent analysis of their own. Authoritarian regimes often prove formidable counterparts, with the capacity to control or expel NGOs that engage in activities that run counter to their own agendas. Furthermore, humanitarian NGOs are frequently instrumentalized in these contexts both by the regimes themselves, who may see humanitarian NGOs as useful pawns in a broader strategic engagement with the outside world, and by western donors who similarly may see humanitarian NGOs as a useful bargaining chip or entry point for engagement with isolated

regimes. The paper has drawn particular attention to the signalling effects associated with humanitarian engagement in authoritarian contexts – donors often provide support for humanitarian agencies as a means of demonstrating that 'something is being done' when alternative channels for engagement are unavailable or need to remain hidden, while regimes' efforts to discipline NGOs can also serve useful political functions, both domestically and internationally.

The overbearing influence of powerful actors in these contexts may imply that there is little that NGOs can do to shape outcomes. The expulsion of thirteen NGOs from Darfur in 2009, for example, demonstrates the difficulties of dealing with regimes that possess both the degree of isolation from the international community, and the capacity necessary to carry out and to manage the consequences of the expulsion. NGOs were clearly instrumentalized in this case, as part of a broader rebuke to western governments for the ICC indictment, and a nationalistic agenda of emphasising government capacity. Nevertheless, as discussed above, there were several ways in which NGOs contributed to these outcomes – by associating too closely with international campaigns, by failing to conduct their own independent analysis of the situation, and by employing inexperienced staff. Although NGOs clearly had limited room for manoeuvre, they were not powerless and the response from the regime was not completely unpredictable.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from the case of the case of Myanmar in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. Here, the application of diplomatic and military pressure on the Myanmar regime from France, the US and the UK for it to open up to international humanitarian assistance led to a hardening of the regime's position and as South (2012: 193) has argued may also 'have resulted in aid to the most vulnerable communities being further delayed, as [it] helped trigger a defensive military deployment of Burma Army units'. But this 'perverse' consequence of international engagement was not unforeseeable. The regime was known to be sensitive to international criticism and concerned about international intervention. The decision of the French Foreign Minister to invoke the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine did not help to allay such fears. Backdoor diplomacy of the kind pursued by ASEAN and the UN was ultimately more successful in convincing the regime to change course. ASEAN's status as a regional organisation that was cautious about interfering in the affairs of its members helped to build trust and establish an effective mechanism for working closely with the government (see Creac'h and Fan 2008).

This paper has suggested that humanitarian NGOs will benefit from a more politically-engaged and comprehensive form of analysis that considers the both the international dynamics of the crisis and the capacities of local actors to respond. It has highlighted the importance of developing some understanding of the incentives that shape the decisions and strategies of authoritarian regimes, as well as generating a clearer picture of how NGOs' presence and links with foreign donors may perform particular functions for these governments. Authoritarian regimes' handling of international NGOs is not simply an outcome of these organisations' actions, but rather a complex response to their perceived threats they (and associated campaign groups, human rights organisations, and western governmental funders) pose to these regimes and to sovereignty.

While one of the central arguments made in this paper is the importance of developing a clearer understanding the strategic behaviour of authoritarian regimes, it is dangerous to

assume that government efforts to restrict the activities of humanitarian agencies are always motivated by broader political or strategic considerations. It is important to consider that delays in issuing visas, for example, may be the result of ineffective bureaucracy, or that concerns about foreign workers' credentials may stem from a legitimate desire to 'protect its populations from negligence' (Kahn & Cunningham 2013: S145).

The recommendations presented in this paper resonate with a broader critique of contemporary humanitarian action, presented by authors such as Slim (2003) and Collinson and Elhawary (2012) who argue that efforts to separate humanitarian action from politics are fundamentally misguided and that a readiness to protect 'humanitarian space' and humanitarian principles is likely to 'divert attention away from the fundamentally political nature of the key challenges and trends affecting humanitarian action in conflict contexts' (Collinson & Elhawary 2012: 3).

In order for humanitarian actors to develop a more politicized and contextualized understanding of their working environments they will also need to develop their capacity to engage and negotiate with governments, other international agencies, and local actors (Egeland et al 2011). This may involve a range of measures which include more regular communication with local authorities, investing in staff with contextualised security expertise, and establishing frameworks to improve coordination amongst NGOs (Egeland et al 2011). The need for these capacities is likely to be greater in authoritarian contexts where engagement is harder and where governmental systems are often more sophisticated. Building a more complex understanding of the limitations and opportunities for humanitarian action in these contexts does not imply abandoning humanitarian principles. Rather than leading to an erosion of principles, this more detailed and politically-engaged understanding should help humanitarian agencies to uphold their principles more effectively.

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